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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: MAYSAN MARSH PRINCE DISCUSSES
POST-SOFA ISSUES

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a Maysan PRT reporting cable.

¶2. (C/REL MCFI) Summary: In a December 6 meeting with PRT members, prominent Maysani Sheikh Abed al-Kareem al-Mohammedawi (aka the Prince of the Marshes) lauded the timely passage of the SOFA and recommended that the U.S. should now look for opportunities to engage Iran. He presented his belief that Iraqi Sunnis -- with appropriate USG prompting -- could help smooth Iraq-Turkey bilateral relations and take advantage of Turkey's relationship with Iran to promote USG-Iran discourse. Sheikh Abed strongly criticized the GOI organization of Tribal Support Councils (TSC), labeling them as destabilizing militias created for political reasons. Describing his own political party, Sheikh Abed's candidates will run for provincial elections on a platform of assistance to the poor and reconstruction for Maysan. He applauded the PRT for last week's well received Mud House theatrical productions in Amarah, and called for more cultural events throughout Maysan. End Summary.

Iraq in the Post-SOFA Era

¶3. (C/REL MCFI) Meeting in his office in downtown Amarah, Sheikh Abed, also known as Abu Hatem or The Prince of the Marshes (the title figure in former CPA member Rory Stewart's book), told Team Leader (TL) that he was pleased with the passage of the SOFA. He called it a smart and timely agreement beneficial for all Iraqis and expressed his opinion that it was only opposed by an uneducated ten percent of the population who had bought into the propaganda against it. He added that even the religious and liberal factions of Iraq's neighbors (i.e. Iran and Syria), who had initially disagreed on support for the agreement, ultimately had embraced it as necessary for stability in Iraq and the region.

Talk with Iran; Bring in the Sunnis

¶4. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed said that now is an opportune time for the incoming U.S. administration to look for opportunities for dialogue with Iran. He stated, "From this point forward, both governments have an opportunity to change the past and find compromise." He also suggested that Prime Minister Maliki should engage Iraqi Sunni politicians to help smooth challenges in Iraq-Turkey bilateral relations, and to leverage Turkey's relationship with Iran to identify common ground for U.S.-Iran talks. He reasoned that Iraqi Sunnis know best how to communicate with their Sunni brothers to the north, and suggested that the U.S. could advise and enable Sunni officials to play a critical negotiating role. He said seeking active involvement from Sunnis on such issues would engender goodwill for PM Maliki and the GOI from Iraq's Sunnis.

Support Council Patronage Will Not Help Da'wa

15. (C/REL MCFI) According to Sheikh Abed, PM Maliki's attempt to cull favor with the Tribal Support Councils (TSC) in the southern provinces will have a minimal effect on improving Da'wa's moderate influence in Maysan, despite the monthly stipend given to the TSC by the GOI. (Comment: PM Maliki's patronage appears to be having some effect in northern Maysan. During a recent patrol to al-Gharbi, the 2-7 CAV Commanding Officer observed numerous prominently displayed poster and billboard advertisements for the Prime Minister throughout the town. The al-Gharbi police chief also confirmed that Maliki was popular among local residents.

Sheikh Sa'adoun, head of the influential Bani Lam tribe in Q Sheikh Sa'adoun, head of the influential Bani Lam tribe in northern Maysan, voiced his support for Maliki in a recent engagement with the PRT. End Comment.)

Limits to Tribal Engagement

16. (C/REL MCFI) Stating emphatically that he was not a TSC member, Sheikh Abed argued that TSCs were detrimental to progress and caused instability through militia and criminal activity. "We have gotten rid of militias and we do not want new ones; they do not help," he emphasized. He fears that Iraq will only realize this mistake when TSC members turn to crime and terrorism after GOI financial support ends. He said the same was true of Sahwa or Sons of Iraq members in other areas -- that they could return to destabilizing activities if GOI funding goes away.

17. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed related that he feels the tribal system is antiquated, and the GOI should adjust its approach

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accordingly and concentrate on government institutions. Instead of the current TSC system overseen by the Prime Minister's office, he advocated an open process to select "educated" tribal leaders nationwide who could contribute leadership and expertise to reconstruction efforts. He commented that Iraq cannot fall back to the 1920s when sheikhs held considerable sway. "We need a new way. It is 2008," he said. He added, "We should not empower elderly sheikhs but rather educate their sons and bring them into the political process."

My Party is Right for Maysan

18. (C/REL MCFI) Turning to the provincial elections, Sheikh Abed explained that his political party, which he called "The List of 319," offered candidates who are right for Maysan and have Iraq's national interest at heart. He stated his party will contest all 27 Provincial Council seats and includes nine women on its candidate list. The party will run on a platform of reconstruction and of assistance for the poor, he said. Asked about his chances, he responded, "I hope we are successful, but if not elected, we will continue working to improve Maysan." Asked the same question about the Sadrists, he predicted, pointing thumbs down, they will have large losses because they have confused Maysanis with their message and diluted their influence by dividing themselves among so many parties.

More Cultural Events Needed

19. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed congratulated the PRT on the December 2-4 Mud House theatre presentations in Amarah. He said this play effectively targeted poor people and was a valuable tool to educate Maysanis about important issues in Iraq. Commenting on the positive Maysani response to the play's nationalistic and democratic messages, he encouraged TL to hold similar events in the future and to work to push them beyond Amarah. He apologized for being out of the province during the performances, and said he could not

recall another theatre performance in over 20 years in Maysan. TL responded that the PRT would look for other opportunities to hold cultural events.

Comment

¶110. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed's assessment of tribal and TSC ineffectiveness in Maysan resonates with recent PRT/CF tribal engagements, which have exposed tribal leaders' lack of visionary leadership and inability to deliver stability or tangible benefits for the populace. Sheikh Abed's vision extends well beyond Maysan, as he has set his sights on national projects, including building Baghdad's new metro system and security contracting for multinational oil companies. While his innovative thoughts on U.S.-Iranian engagement and better inclusion of Iraq's Sunnis may prove difficult to implement, they indicate his efforts to be seen as a big-picture thinker with Iraq's best interests at heart.

End Comment.

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